Stand Inside Your Love

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Stand Inside Your Love

by Zigzagwanderer

Summary

H and Will have survived the Fall. They live together as Thomas and Eirik Buckley on an island in the Sarvia Archipelago, in the chilly Baltic sea. As time goes on, they use their pseudonyms to help explore their real relationship. (see 'Are the riders coming?' and 'How My Heart Behaves' in particular, but sorry, it's kind of all the way through the series!) Thanks as always, to any one reading!! xxxxxxxxx zigzag-wanderer on Tumblr. Ps just wanted to thank my kind anon who commissioned the sublime beatricenius to depict chapter five. Thank you both I'm in shock!!!!!!!!!xxxxxxxxxxx

Chapter 1

Spanish Gunvald leaves the chandlery better off than when he harboured there. He has not been made to pay his bill, and he has half of Thomas Buckley's ridiculously-opulent packed lunch tucked into his own knapsack.

He waves from his deck, in a gruff, barnacle-knuckled way, at Sandy and Conn, then, as the wind spends itself on his sails, he shouts out loudly to Ernesta that she charges too much for rope anyway, and is therefore no better than a thieving she-wolf.

The men of Sarvia do not respect merchants, they respect only two things; boatbuilders, and anyone who can cook meat.

Will can keep most vessels in the water, and, well, Hannibal in the kitchen is Hannibal in heaven.

The archipelago has fallen for the Buckleys, and even Axel Aho tolerates them, now that he has learned that Thomas has a fortune to go with his succulent, filthy mouth.

"How can a rich boy be so bad at business, Thom?" Ernesta scolds, coming downstairs to check on the takings, hobbling about and cracking things with her walking stick. She has a broken foot, from kicking a tree.

While she was having it reset in Lindbakk, Hannibal rowed over, chopped down the offender, and bundled it into firewood for her.

"Uh?" Will shrugs, distracted. He bites a fingernail. Puts up the closed sign on the chandlery doors and rehangs Ernesta's St Erasmus medallion over the lintel, to keep the devil out.

He only hopes Hannibal doesn't hit his head on it when he comes to retrieve Will later on.

Because, of course, Hannibal will be fine. Committing arson in broad daylight at an exclusive medical facility.

Absolutely fine.

"Guess Eirik changed me," Will tells Ernesta, softly, because he is terrified; but the truth is the truth, even if told in the commerce of lies.

"And where is Leif the Long today, while you sit and pine miserably for him and make me bankrupt with your unwanted assistance?"

"You blind old crow. Eirik cut his hair short again, remember?"

"None of us call him that because of his hair, rich boy." Ernesta snorts, getting out the aquavit. "Like they say, don't cure sausage in the window if you don't want bears to sniff at it."

Will stares. Then scowls. “He’s settling something up on the mainland.”

By this, Will means that Hannibal is at the oncology clinic, setting fire to their patient files; a Viking funerary rite for the part of him that was sacrificed to their knives.

“And I’ve been disinherited. Family don’t speak to me, or know where I am. So you can quit calling me that dumb nickname.”

“Aha. A saga to be told. Did you give up money for love, rich boy? Here’s to stupidity, then.” Ernesta salutes with her tin mug full of liquor. “What on earth did you two do anyhow, Thom? Kill somebody and run away to Sarvia together?”

Will drinks his drink; it is Hannibal’s recipe; a bad, rough angel on his tongue.

He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Well now, Ernesta,” he winks at Sandy, who is inconsolable too. “Do you really want to know?”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Will tells his tale...

“You’re an actual Count?” Thom has come straight from some desiccated beach wedding; bleached weeds on the veiled and vulpine bride. Bereaved bridesmaids. Roses the colour of soured milk.

He could have stayed. At the fancy, white-dusted reception, with the rest of the fancy, white-dusted people; Thom was offered cocaine, a glass of champagne and the groom that the glass and the cocaine belonged to.

Instead, he has flown towards Eirik's studio, which is a world of ramshackle orderliness. He is leaning against Eirik’s angled desk, taking off his thousand-dollar tie, while Eirik tidies away for the day, reaching around him to patiently put pencils away in their worn leather pouches, clips and rulers into their battered wooden cases.

Thom thinks Eirik works too hard, but then, how the hell would he know?

He is watching Eirik's wrists go about their god-damn mesmerising business when he notices.
There is a crest on an inkstand on a pen-tray.
The piece is clearly very old; the gold of it like frozen fire as it takes the late afternoon sun.

The heraldry features a pair of entwining beasts.
It's pretty erotic; Thom is almost certain that snakes shouldn’t do that to stags.

Discreetly staring between the two fine things, the two precious things, the metal and the man, Thom wonders how he could have missed it. Those cheekbones, that mouth. “Jesus. Genuine European nobility? No wonder Dad fucking hates you.”

“Quite,” Eirik makes a few neat notes in his Rolodex. "All hereditary honours are meaningless, Thomas." His work for Thom's father has unintentionally brought new contracts. His finding Thom has brought the creative rejuvenation to go with them. “Mouldering splendour. My grandmother told me that we had carriages lined up in front of our castle but no meat for the pot.”

Thom does not enquire about the *castle* straight away, because Eirik has just stood up and put his hands on Thom’s hips.

The gentleness of the gesture mocks him; Thom is stabbed through with a jagged, glorious desire that he still cannot quite believe is his to endure.

Thirty-nine days.

Thirty-nine agonising days.

It cannot be real.

Thom has done nothing during his selfish, squandered life to have deserved this kind of torture. He has never saved a child's life, he has never sacrificed his own contentment for the greater good, he has never stopped a bad guy in his tracks.

Eirik is frowning, tiredly. “Would you mind if we took supper at my home tonight? Something simple? I promise that you may soundtrack the occasion,” he lets go, so that if Thom decides to leave, his fingers won’t break around the emptiness. “Which means nothing classical,” he adds solemnly, “unless it pleases you.”

Thom’s heart hallelujahs against his hand-stitched shirt, and he wants to tell Eirik that he is pleased by *everything*.

But he hardly understands himself. He is no longer his own, poor design; Eirik is delineating what he is now, what Thom has always been waiting to be. It is an erasure, but a restoration as well. He is plainly patterned now, in grilled cheese and Gorecki. He is gilded now, only, in the spice of a certain cologne, of arms tanned from sketching outside, of eyes of frozen fire that see him, and are unafraid.

Thom is literally back on the drawing board.

"Uh, sure. Sounds good."

An evening, alone. Together. No gawking waiters. No noisy, fashionable bars. No long-planned fundraisers that Thom can’t weasel out of. No deadlines that Eirik cannot defer.

Just Thom, and Eirik. A kitchen. A dining room.

A bedroom.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Thom draws the line in harder, with more weight, against the new background of his life. Eirik *looks* at him, making sure he is sure, and Thom finds even breathing *beautifully* painful.

He grins, and only knows that he is grinning because it changes Eirik’s smile in turn. From something veiled into something golden.

So Thom lifts up Eirik's hands and puts them back upon his hips. “Babe," he says, "that sounds really fucking good.”

Chapter 3

They wake up late, under a blanket, on an antique psychiatrist's couch; Eirik's place is eclectic, shabby, perfect. He uses a vintage library ladder as a shoe-rack, for God's sake.

They are honeyed together, sweetly and stickily, and so they bathe.

Thom gets a change of clothing from his car, borrows a sweater from Eirik, and out they go.

Everyone at Uncle Jack's admires and ignores Thom; if he is a muse then this devotional disdain is his due. He is placed on an old church pew against a mossy brick wall, and is fed what everyone else in the bistro is eating; ham and lacy fried eggs with a tall, waisted glass of *fine a l'eau* hanging off its skirt-tails. The coffee is strong and comes, and comes, and comes.

Jack's widow brings them scorched bread scrubbed over with garlic and tells Eirik it's about time he got back into portraiture.

"Those chilly renderings you do of the Uffizi, Ricki, dear, we all hate them to death. They *are* death. Put this boy in paint. Blue, blue, blue," she stabs near Thom's eyes with the toasting fork. "Remember the words of Cezanne; 'there is no model, there is only colour.' This one… you already have him glowing from the inside out. Put him on canvas and he would *burn* for you."

Several of the other patrons break off from their quarrelling and breakfasting to mutter agreement. Even down to the brandy buzzing in his blood it is, for Thomas, like attending any other company meeting; being used and referred to as if he was the most important thing in the entire world, while also being treated as the most invisible.

Eirik apologises on behalf of the artistic community, and they eat.
They are hungry. They feed the hunger that comes as a companion to happiness.
They don't speak. They just sit opposite each other and *see*.

Thom finishes up first and makes a sated little sound in his throat. Licks and laps the sharp, stinking oil from his fingers.
Eirik watches silently, and so, of course, Thom does it again, drawing out the work, the sliding and the sucking, for as long as he goddamn can.

Eirik blushes.

Thom thinks to himself; I am in love with a man that blushes when he looks at my tongue.

Then he thinks; oh.

A table next to theirs rocks, as the children of Lascaux suddenly bicker over what they have always bickered over; when is a line a good line, a true line. There is a good deal of angry sketching, in the air, in the spilled coffee, in the soul.

Eirik clears his throat, choking on the regret that must have downcast Thom's eyes so suddenly, and quietly pays the bill.

Chapter 4

Ernesta is asleep in her chair, ugly and true and old, full of painkillers and romantic parables and spirituous liquor.

Will walks out to the quayside.
His head turns towards the brooding mainland; the flat, black backbone of it riding the belly of water below.

Hannibal is late.

How. If. Could.

Brittle is his wedding band, against the worrying of his fingers in his hair, against Sandy's sudden, anxious nudge of fur.

No. Never. Please.

"He won't let anything stop him from coming home, honey," Will tells the dog, crouching down. "Listen, by the time I finish the story, he'll be back where he belongs, ok?"

"I have been discovered, then? Unmasked?" Eirik is an epicure of silence. It is, for him, a conductor of observations. A conduit for revelation.
He himself moves quietly, always, and he appreciates the aesthetics of the predator in others. He has certainly never felt the slightest perturbation in the absence of conversation, until the walk home from Uncle Jack's.

Disquiet makes him unintentionally ungracious. "Someone told you about my family's title?"

"Hmm?" Thomas is roused by Eirik's tone, and stops marvelling at his own, hitherto unknown, capacity for love; at his own, god-damn miracle.

Eirik cannot bear to see Thom struggling to pay attention to him, and so turns away.

It cannot be. *This*.

Eirik knows that he is too unpolished, too unpractised. He cannot continue to tether to himself such a brightly plumaged creature, which belongs, by rights, to some finer, flightier flock.

Thom is frowning, remembering who said what to him, and where. People other than Eirik aren't really to his taste anymore. "Um," he shrugs. "The du Maurier harpy? She was at Brian's wedding. She's always at these things. The ones with free merlot, anyhow. Hungarian royalty my ass."

“Bedelia?” Eirik smooths down the front of his red sweater, surprised. Ideally, he would be smoothing down the blue one that Thom is wearing, but his hands are just stumbling now, wandering down a road they don’t even recognise, in a lonely nightmare that he cannot seem to wake them from. “She is not Hungarian, no. But her family is certainly an old one, from an old continent. We are, I believe, distant cousins.”

“No shit.” Thomas says, then bites down on his lip. He is so uncouth. All he can do is cuss and crab. “God. Sorry. It’s just that…well, I was pretty fucking sure she was trying to stir up the scum for Lounds to put in her trashy tabloid...”

“We did have a relationship.” Four bullets and an uneven knife of sharp syllables; Eirik cannot fathom why his words are spilling out in this way, as if he wants to cut, to wound.

“Oh?”

“In fact, I am having supper with her tonight,” Eirik continues, helplessly. “She wanted to speak to me about a proposal.”

“Oh?” Thom feels nauseous.

“I agreed, because you had said that you were…were…that you had a prior engagement.”

“Oh?” Thom shrugs. Adjusts his glasses. Swallows. “Oh, yeah. Forgot that I have a…date.”

He cannot deny that he been fulfilling obligations made *Before*.

The outstanding suitors have been dispatched as humanely as possible; Thom has ruthlessly killed off all other opportunities, and murdered any hopes those opportunists might have held. He has been trying to behave as Eirik would behave, and also as he imagines that Eirik would wish him to behave, and so he has been charitable, and he has been chaste.

He may have cut out a few hearts, but, for once, they have not been indecently displayed.

“Of course. You have a date.” Eirik does a polite little bow that might as well be a falling-forward onto something bladed, or the start of a plunge from a precipice. “And I am sure that you will have a wonderfully interesting evening.”

And so, divided as if by some invisible wall, they part.

Chapter 5

1.

The hours drop like petals. They peel away and fall, each one more bruised and mortified than the last.

Thom is summoned to his father's office to signs contracts, then ends up taking the legal team out for mojitos at that place with all those stuffed antelope heads above the bar.

The day clouds over; Thom drives a shining dagger of a car way too fast between the ribs of the canyon.

He free-climbs Coyote Overhang as the thunderheads build. At first survey, the stone wall seems dead, closed in upon itself, but as Thom learns it, and loves it, it finds places for him to fit into; secret places, places it will only show to him. He buries himself into it, he scales it and rises with it, pressing himself to it, and he is safer there, and more beloved, than he has ever been in some fancy, silken bed.

And if the fall from the very top of the wall should kill him, then so be it.

Eirik sits in his apartment and does his tax returns. Badly.
Because it seems that all he can do is subtract, and answer in the negative. And omit. And divide.

He answers the doorbell, in the end, in case his elderly, lonely neighbour has locked himself out. Again.
It is not kindness, just a karmic calculation, a selfish underwriting against the certain outcome of his own future.

"I can't just…not be with you." Thom is dusty, on the doorstep. He smells of orangeade. Of a waterless scrub. Eirik's blue sweater is tied around his shoulders. Knotted, as Eirik's arms should be, around his neck.

They go and stand in the kitchen.

Thom wishes he had paid more attention to all the criticisms he has been handed down since adolescence. All the therapy. All the county court summing ups. Maybe they were supposed to help, after fucking all.

"I can't not be with you," he repeats, tugging the curling hair out of his eyes. Knows that he desires something that he does not deserve. Leans forward, then back. Shrugs. "What do you want? Tell me. I'll want it too."

Thom is wearing an open-necked shirt. It is a deep cream colour, a smoky, vanilla cream colour, and there is sweat on his throat, which is flushed, between the two clean, creamy edges. Eirik could move his mouth over that skin, just there, and then the sweat would be on his lips, taken in by his tongue, and there would be a little sand mixed in with it, a little grit from whichever wasteland Thomas has been to today, while they have not been together.

Grit. And cream. How could Eirik not want this?

He watches Thom tap on the edge of the kitchen table. In a moment he will push at his glasses. Or pull at them.

Eirik has no love for the immaculate; he needs the broken line of a thing. It is in the flaw, in the rough edge that lies the satisfaction, the skewed victory of noticing interesting imperfections, of adoring the unevenness of a smile, the twitching line of a shoulder. He wonders if this explains how gods feel, when they make and disassemble their creations.

He kisses Thom, and it is not sublime; and they are not gods, they are just two men. But they are everything, it is everything, which is so much better.

Thom sweats under Eirik's hands; he always does, he is always so hot beneath him, and Thom hasn't shaved, and he is altogether an abrasive intrusion; a hot, wet erosion into the careful geology of Eirik's life.

"What do you want," Thom slides the words around between them.

His eyes are changing. Blue to rain-blue. Building thunder behind them.

Eirik takes off Thom's glasses, lifts the sweater from him, and starts helping him with their buttons.

"I want you."

"But what do you *want*?" Thom is undoing his belt buckle. Stroking Eirik's chest with restless flutterings.

Eirik blinks.

Love and love and love. The climates and the landscape of it.

He says, "when you move, Thomas. Under me. Over me. It is like the ocean. It is unending." He catches Thom's hands in his own. Holds them.

"But what I want now, is for you…to be still."

2.

They start walking backwards and sideways, around the table and into the room with the big, scarlet, studded-edged couch. Thom doesn't really know what such a room is called.

A salon?

He looks at the scarves suspended on the coat rack. Touches his belt again. His wrists tingle at the phantom touch of the leather, the silk. Tangled and taut.
“You want to make it so that I can’t move.” He looks at Eirik, and stops smiling.

Hannibal doesn’t have a particular expression on his face, he seems to have about a hundred, none of which seem particularly playful.
“No,” Hannibal says, blinking again. His head tilts, patiently.

Eirik comes back a little way.
But not all of the way.

“I would like *you* to make it so that you cannot move,” he clarifies, undressing Thom, kissing him, then putting him down on the smooth, prickling nap of the material. “You will be still, to please me. No ties. No restraints. Only your wish to please me will hold you in place. For once, still, and quiet.”

He runs a fingertip from Thom’s anklebone to his knee, then from his knee to his hip.
“Can you, Will? Can you do this? To please me?”

Already Will doubts it. Already Will wants to spread himself, arch towards that fingertip, rotate around Hannibal like a god-damn whirlpool.

Not waiting for an answer, Hannibal places his own shirt, neatly, on the floor.

3.

Inside. Outside. And between, there are rims and ridges of sensation. There are circles of suction and small, punctuating pains.

Everything Eirik does to Thom demands a reaction. Everything is too good, too unique, not to react to. Will wants and wants, and denies it, and struggles against it, and he curses Hannibal with every sweet word he knows.

And it is only deep where Eirik cannot see, deep in the very muscle and the aching tracts of his own body, in the dark, in the twilit parts of himself, that Thom allows himself to clench and writhe and harden and melt.

But he keeps faith. He whines a little. But he keeps still.

Then he shuts his eyes. Which is not allowed.
“No, no, no,” Hannibal chides, using his sharp teeth.
Thom screws up his face even further. He is frightened. Of the face he will see above him if he opens up.
There have been so many. Masks. Versions. The dead. The cruel. Victims. Killers. Past ghosts.

But the hand on his cheek is Eirik's; it is Hannibal's, and so Will looks, and sees.

"More?" Eirik says softly, and Thom rolls his head back.

Yes. And yes. And yes.

Yielding, not submitting. Will lies stiller yet. His skin is scalding from the tightness and his own triumph and the touch of Hannibal's tongue.

Inside. Outside. Rim and ridge. Ocean and canyon.

His thighs are lifted, and Will is trembling, and the velvet becomes as blood beneath them, hot and wet and the red of itself.

"Oh. My fucking sweet baby. I fucking want you so much." Will slowly angles his arms, controlling, controlled, because that much will be allowed, until his hands are anchored on the beaded edge of the backrest.

Hannibal is strong, and Will is strong, too.
They brace against the floor, the couch, one another.

"Can I move?" Will whispers.

"No." Hannibal shakes his head.

Will nods fiercely, in agreement, and watches with his teeth pressed together tightly in his skull, watching, still as can be, while Hannibal fucks into him and watches him back.

He wants to keep the tension and the momentary agony of it, but he cannot hold onto it. It slips and comes back; a bright thing, a sweet, cursed thing, in the dark. Brighter, more bright, sweeter each time.
His hips hurt. Saliva runs down his throat. Eirik pushes harder, home. It is the best thing. The sweetest thing. It is home.

Harder, and then home. A slipping, escaping, chased thing, a golden light in the darkness of Thom's body. His hips slip in sweat, and Hannibal pushes. Again.

And in the end, when they come, Eirik and Thom, or Hannibal and Will, they are holding hands, always, tightly, nails drawing crescents of blood and delicate finger bones cracking, just like some darling old married couple.

4.

And they take so long in the shower that the hot water runs out. Thom can't stop laughing about it. Eirik is incredibly clumsy in his bliss, he is like a drunk, and he is wildly handsome,

and Thom is so busy watching this handsome, quiet, graceful man stumble into his clothing that he almost misses that Eirik is putting on a good suit and a tie and cologne.

“I am having supper with Bedelia Du Maurier, Thom, remember?” Eirik sits on the edge of the bed, tying lopsided shoelaces with numbed fingers.

The sheet is worn. He sees the damp curls at Thom’s groin through the translucency of it and wishes he was rude enough to cancel an appointment at such short notice.

“Yeah,” Thom hums some of Berg’s Piano Sonata. “Just thought, you know, as I’d tossed my date out of the window, you could refrain from being eaten alive by a blonde in Blahniks.”

Thomas stretches and shrugs, sated, and he smells of Eirik’s shampoo, of his body, in the way that lovers do; it is a borrowing of all that they are, an appropriation of *anima*.

He is soaped with the soul of another.

Eirik looks up and frowns.
At himself, not at Thom.

“You must forgive me. I had not meant to cause you unease. I am a novice at…partnerships.”

Thom runs the tip of his tongue across his lower lip.
“You may as well call me your god-damn boyfriend and have done,” he says innocently.

Eirik decides he could be a little late, on just this one occasion.

“So, the harpy has a proposal, you said,” Thom helps Eirik re-dress as he is, by now, incapable of managing by himself.
“Family business, of a sort.” Eirik gets out a worn leather document case. Searches for his wallet. “Bedelia is looking to sell some assets. She mentioned there is some property I have previously shown an interest in purchasing from her. An island, as it happens. In the chilly Baltic sea.”

“Oh? Will we get to wear those matching sweaters couples have? And co-ordinating knitted hats? Can we keep huskies?”

Eirik ignores the grit, and stares indulgently at the cream. “I may not be able to invest. It will be difficult to raise the capital because I have only the irregular income from my work.”

“Hmm, yeah, right, that whole starving artist thing.” Six weeks ago Thom would have just bought the fucking place and laid it at Eirik’s feet. Like it was a dozen red roses. Like it was nothing.

But now he puts down his grilled cheese and says, casually, “maybe we should, you know, get some kind of joint funding. Easier to nail a loan with two names on the application.”

There is a space in the whole composition then, where Thom wonders if he has overstepped. Then Eirik looks at him in that quiet way he has, where he really sees Thom and he nods, mildly, shyly.

It could be the best investment he’s ever made.

“Yeah?” Thom grins back. “Yeah. A conjoining of our portfolios? Hey, what’s this place called anyhow? Does a floating rock even get a name?”

“Vakkrehejm,” Eirik says, as they kiss goodbye and he leaves Thom to await his return, in the bed that is now their bed. “It is called Vakkrehejm.”

“Yeah?" Thom lifts up an eyebrow and brushes toast crumbs off his chest. "Does that mean something?”

“Indeed,” Eirik pictures a little white house, with a latticed veranda that could do with a coat of paint. “It means; 'beautiful home', Thom. It means our beautiful home.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Their beautiful home is west of Ernesta's place. Hannibal is over eastwards somewhere.

There is wine in the sky that way, made from berries that you would pick from a hedgerow like handfuls of garnets.
It pours, brambling, over the horizon, as Will watches from his shivering seat on the pier's edge, and thorns of gold cut through it as the sun reaches down, towards its end.

The archipelagic sea runs brown and red and cold at Will's feet. He finishes speaking, and for a moment cannot tell if he was talking aloud to himself or not.

Perhaps he has been reading from a book paged out of old water and older light, bound about with newer fears.
A book that he has now let go of, that has slipped away from his lap, back into the sea, back into the broad cup of the sunset, as he wishes to slip back into the arms that fear compasses him toward, now, and not away from.

Not anymore.

"Come inside, idiot boy. The otters have had enough of you." Ernesta has hobbled up behind him, in a hideous shawl. She prods his hunched shoulders with her ferrule, but gently. "Let them return to their necessary cruelties. Let them feed, and not on fables."

They walk up the concrete path. Weeds have cracked it open in places, so Will takes her arm. For some reason, he cannot bring himself to tread on the faintly glistering flowerheads, the green solder that is filling up the fissures and the breaks in the grey, gritty porcelain.
"You should have woken me up," Ernesta grumbles, dustily, coughing. "I suppose I've slept through all the sexy parts? Sounds just like my third marriage."

In the chandlery, Will haunts the aisles. He is a ghost-in-the-negative, moving his body only, soul-lost and aimless, for the rest of him is to the east, alive, and flaming.

He cannot check the news feeds. He must not bite his nails.

He is just offal, animated.

His stomach hurts; concern for Hannibal has always been, not just hard to swallow, an inconvenience, but bitterly worm-wooded with misgiving, vitrioled with anger.
It has been so much sweeter now, for so long, that he had almost forgotten what such heartburn was like.

Ernesta says nothing, but watches him twitch, and keeps the aquavit coming.

Finally, Conn lifts his monumental head, and Sandy starts to bark, his cries wild, yellow, delighted.

It is all Will needs. He doesn't even have to go to the window to look.

"Ah," Ernesta is shameless, she shuffles over to squint through the salt-smear at the approaching boat. "At last I can be rid of you."
The boys nudge open the door and run off down to the quayside.

"*Lower thine eye,*" Ernesta recites, to Will, but to all who wait, who have ever waited, "*peep through thine braids,*
Sign thy skirted view with victory-runes.
Scan the dark; thine husband has returned, unscathed,
Fasten thine fair eyes on thine husband; the father of victory has returned."

Will starts to gather up their things. It keeps his hands steady.

"Did you just compare me to a lovesick Viking maiden, you old witch?" He checks her clock to see if she is due more morphine. "How come Eirik gets to be the father of victory?"

Ernesta is rummaging amongst a scrap-heap of official documents stacked on the counter-top. "Bah," she snorts. "Don't pretend you've never called him Daddy."

Then she straightens up as much as she can, given the way that age is sipping away at her bones, and she peers at Will as steadily as she can, given the way that she, too, has been sipping away.

"I would be interested to know what you do call one another," she says, very clearly, "once you have put Thomas and Eirik away in their boxes for another day. Maybe, sometime, you will tell me."

Will stops packing up a dog-blanket and stares at her.
She is holding out an envelope to him, but he keeps staring at her, instead.

"I guess I must have misheard most of that," he offers, slowly, palms suffocating between the folds of dense wool he is stuffing, brutally, into the rucksack, trying not to make a weapon of it, trying not to imagine how very easy it would be to do so.

"Bah," she repeats. "Am I an infant, to believe your fairy-tales, then?"
Will frowns and reflexively glances at the front and back doors. He doesn't think she even owns a telephone. Or a radio.

Ernesta is all alone.

She has only her tongue to keep her safe.

"It would be better," he offers, again, even more slowly, "if you did."
"Lots of things should be better than they are." Ernesta reaches forward with a grimace and places Will's fingers around her gift. The paper of the envelope is of fine, legal quality. Thick. A business-like beige.

Ernesta settles once more in her chair.
“I have lived through various wars.” She puts the walking stick aside. She could not be more defenceless. “I have survived hunger, pain, loss. At fifteen, I was given away, in holy matrimony, to an animal, who, after the hundredth time of beating me senseless, of shaming my innocence with his lust, I pushed into a fjord with bricks tied to each ankle. I have loved men and women and I have hated both men and women, and I have acted upon that love, and I have acted upon that hate.”

Ernesta leans forward. “If your lives were as you so frequently describe them, Thom, you and your dear Eirik would not look at each other the way that you do.”

Conn and Sandy are with Hannibal now, as he finishes tying up on Ernesta’s dock. Will can hear them all together, steady Conn and shy Sandy.

And Hannibal.
Because Hannibal is there, too, safe, with their boat, and their boys, down on the dock together, which is as it should be.

Together, and safe, which is as it must be.

“And how do we look at each other?” Will whispers.

“With terror.” Ernesta shrugs. “Not of one another, naturally, but of the other being taken away.”

“I told you that my family disapproves.”

The old hag tuts. “But they are not about to fry off your balls in an electric chair, are they?”

There is a stillness inside the chandlery.
It lasts for as long as it takes Conn to insist upon a stick being thrown once or twice across Ernesta’s yard.

Hannibal is obliging, which means that the arson went well.

“You must never speak this way, not to him.” Will says it as menacingly as he can, but Ernesta looks a little bored, now. “Not to Eirik, not ever. Not a single word, to Eirik. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes.” Ernesta nods. “I just told you I know all about monsters, Thom. What do you take me for?”

She pokes a sly grin at the envelope that Will has forgotten he is holding. “Now, put that somewhere safe, and certainly do not entrust it to the bastard Aho. My lawyer is on the mainland, so when the time comes, just contact them.”

Hannibal is nearly at the door. He would be at the door, were it not for the boys wrapping themselves around each step.

Will is so conflicted and tired and relieved he cannot open the door or the envelope.

“This place.” Ernesta taps her boot-heels down on her floorboards. “It’s yours. When I die. I don’t expect that it will thrive, with an idiot boy like you in charge, but it might help add ballast to the longship of lies that you currently call your life, here in Sarvia. Add to the ongoing alibi, so to speak.”

Then she actually winks.

“Alibi?” Hannibal repeats, pleasantly, coming in. “Good evening, Ernesta. Hello, Thomas.”

He just starts looking at Will.
Will starts looking back at Hannibal.

Ernesta makes a rude noise.

“Are you okay?” Eirik asks his husband, softly.
Eirik is sensitive.

Hannibal is sharp.
“Are you ok?” Hannibal asks Will, softly.

He flicks his forked tongue out into the air, to taste what may be wrong, and tilts his head, like the predator that he is, but his eyes remain where they must remain.

“Now, yeah,” Will nods. “Everything’s just fine.”

He smiles, and goes over, and puts his head against Hannibal’s chest.
Will can smell smoke, distantly; it is a long way away. “Now, yeah, I really am okay.”

And he knows what it is like, to have gold in every sunset.

And he knows what it is like, to fear, and to love.

And he knows what it is like, to have bricks tied to his bones, and to be falling, forever, into the sea.

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to say a big thank you to everyone who reads/kudos/comments.
Hugs.xxxxxxxxxxx

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